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Westernized, Savvy, and Maybe Russia's New Leader

By Charles Fenyvesi

HE IS THE ONE likely successor to Leonid Brezhnev who speaks English, has lived abroad, plays tennis and cultivates a man-of-the-world image different from a dour provincial *apparatchik's*. He is fond of cynical political jokes with an anti-regime twist. He collects abstract art, likes jazz and Gypsy music, dances the tango gracefully and, most unusual, he has a record of stepping out of his high party official's cocoon to contact dissidents.

His name is Yuri Andropov, and Soviet emigrés describe him as the smartest and the most cultured man in the upper reaches of Soviet power — as well as the cunning strategist who throttled both the human rights and the Jewish nationalist movements. The American assessment is similar but based on second-hand information since, for the past two decades, no American official has spoken with him.

But, according to U.S. intelligence, Andropov has a serious heart problem and has had a heart attack. And most observers believe that in his bid for the top job he is handicapped by the fact that he was the KGB's boss for the past 15 years. The KGB may guard the paperpushers of the Communist Party from enemies at home and abroad, and under Brezhnev the secret police did not liquidate party members. However, party rank-and-file are historically uneasy with the idea of having as their secretary general a secret police chief who once bugged their conversations and kept files on them.

There is bound to be jealousy as well. The party is watched by the secret police. But there is no KGB looking over the shoulders of the KGB, and thus, as strange as it may sound, the KGB is the freest and most independent organization in the Soviet structure. And it is conceivable that keeping in close touch with dissidents at home or observing the great wide world abroad affects KGB agents. Under Andropov's worldly stewardship, the KGB might have become a safe place for closet liberals, just as the CIA was a good place for American liberals during the years of McCarthyism.

Sharply tailored in a West European style, Andropov is about 5 feet 8, handsome with receding silver hair and a good public speaker. He has impressed party audiences by being able to deliver a speech without notes. He is an ethnic Russian, a native of Karelia, an autonomous Soviet republic bordering Finland, the son of a railway worker and a party member since 1939.

His star is clearly on the rise. He is 67, which is about the average age in the Politburo, the party's 14-man board of directors. Last week he was appointed to succeed Mikhail Suslov, the party's chief theoretician who until his death this January held the rank of Central Committee secretary. The only other Politburo members who have the rank of Central Committee secretary are Brezhnev — whose title of general secretary means that he is Number One — and the two other candidates for the top job most frequently mentioned: Andrei Kirilenko, 75, and Konstantin Chernenko, 70.

Over the past two years or so, Chernenko has emerged as Brezhnev's personal choice as his successor. But Western observers doubt if Brezhnev has the power to install as his heir a man who is seen by their comrades as his crony and valet.

Andropov is the only Soviet leader believed to have had direct contacts with Soviet intellectuals critical of the party line. Once in power, he could prove the paradox of a secret police chief being more reform-minded than the party he was to protect from reformers.

According to accounts U.S. experts consider reliable, on several occasions in the past 10 years Andropov invited leading dissidents to his home for well lubricated discussions that sometimes extended to the wee hours of the morning. Andropov also encouraged his high-ranking subordinates to contact some key dissidents and conduct correct, even friendly conversations with them.

At a private meeting in Washington a few years ago, one highly respected dissident revealed that in the early '70s he had met with Andropov, whom he described as well read, westernized and a perfect host who even sent a car to pick him up and to return him home. Contacted in Jerusalem, the dissident now denies having met with Andropov, but acknowledges meeting with KGB officials serving just under Andropov.

According to a story spread in Moscow by the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and repeated by his friend the novelist Vasily Aksyonov now living in Washington, Yevtushenko had had a friendly relationship with Andropov and called on him to protest Alexander Solzhenitsyn's arrest. Prior to the meeting, Yevtushenko fortified his spirits with vodka, and Andropov's reply to his anguished appeal to free Solzhenitsyn was a chilly dismissal: Call me again when you are sober.